

# new york minute

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## What do Upstate New Yorkers Think of Poverty and Poor People?

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### What is the Issue?

The recent “Occupy Wall Street” protests fueled debates about income inequality, poverty, unemployment and the role of government in the United States, although in some shape or form, this debate has ebbed and flowed for decades. Americans have diverse opinions about the causes of poverty and inequality, so it is unsurprising that responses and reactions to these recent events have ranged from pointing the finger at Wall Street, to blaming politicians and policy makers, to accusing the unemployed and the poor themselves for their disadvantaged situations. Understanding these views of the poor is important, as these opinions have a great impact on the extent of public and political support for policies aimed at ameliorating the negative impacts of poverty. This *New York Minute* examines Upstate New Yorker’s views of the poor.

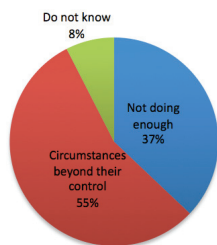
In general, the plight of the poor, unemployed, and/or struggling working Americans has received much more focus in this recent recession than was true during the preceding decade. Most Americans have at least one family member and/or close friend who has lost their job or had difficulty finding one during the recession. The latest Census figures show that 15% of the U.S. population was poor in 2010 (American Community Survey 2010 1-year estimates). This is a significant increase over the 2000 level of 12.4%. Ten years ago, poverty in New York State was higher than the national level (14.6% in 2000 - 2000 Decennial Census), but remained relatively unchanged by the end of the decade (14.9% in 2010).

### How do Upstate New Yorkers’ view the poor?

Opinions about the poor as individuals are often influenced by whether the public views poverty as a “structural” problem (e.g., caused by a lack of jobs matched to person’s skills), or an individual-level problem (e.g., the result of personal failings). In other words, does the larger

economic context create conditions that lead to poverty, or is the choices and behavior of individuals that cause them to be poor? In the spring of 2011, CaRDI surveyed 600 upstate New Yorkers on a variety of public policy issues, including poverty (CaRDI SOUS Survey, 2011). When asked “Which is the bigger cause of poverty today?”, 55% responded that poverty was caused by circumstances beyond people’s control, but more than a third (37%) felt that poor people did not do

**Figure 1: Which is the bigger cause of poverty today?**



Source: 2011 SOUS Survey

enough to help themselves (Figure 1).

Of those who felt that poverty was caused by people not doing enough, about a third said that by this they meant that poor people

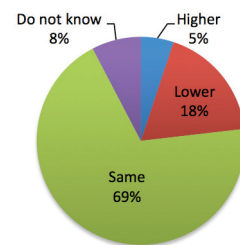
were lazy. Another third felt that poor people abused government programs. The lack of education and unwillingness to take available jobs were also cited as examples of what some people felt explained poor people’s poverty status.

Of the fifty-five percent of respondents who felt that poverty was caused by circumstances beyond peoples’ control, the lack of jobs was cited as the major reason (more than 50%). “Poor economic conditions” was also cited by a significant number.

These findings for New York State are similar to those found a decade earlier for the U.S. as a whole. In 2001 the *NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Survey about Poverty in America* showed that about 48% of Americans felt that poverty was caused by “People not doing enough to help themselves”, and 45% felt it was caused by “circumstances beyond their control” ([www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/poverty/](http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/poverty/)).

The 2011 SOUS survey asked another question identical to one asked on the *NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Survey* – “Do poor people have higher, lower or the same moral values as other Americans?” A solid majority (69%) felt that poor people had the same moral values as other Americans (Figure 2). Almost one in five, however, felt they had lower moral values. The responses were almost identical a decade earlier in the national-level *NPR* study (67% and 21%, respectively).

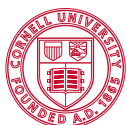
**Figure 2: Do poor people have higher, lower or the same moral values as other Americans?**



Source: 2011 SOUS Survey

### Conclusion

Upstate New Yorkers’ opinions about the causes of poverty and the moral values of the poor do not vary significantly from those of Americans’ in general. It is interesting to note that while 37% of respondents to the CaRDI survey indicated that poverty was caused by people not doing enough to help themselves, only 18% felt that poor people have lower moral values than other Americans. Based on even these limited findings, there appears to be a grey area of perception. Public sentiment towards whether poor people are “deserving” or not of government assistance often weighs heavily into levels of support or opposition for such policies. Opinions about “the poor” might vary significantly if different language is used such as “people who can’t take care of themselves”, “struggling working families”, etc. Poverty policy and the government’s role in ameliorating poverty and inequality may be an issue in the 2012 Presidential election. It remains to be seen whether or not the candidates’ positions bear any resemblance to the public’s perceptions of poverty discussed in this *Minute*. ▲



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